

# STARS AND STRIPES®

THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 2026

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Hegseth: 'Takes money to kill bad guys'

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Thursday that the Pentagon has asked the White House for additional funds for the war in Iran but declined to set a figure, which has been reported at \$200 billion.

"It takes money to kill bad guys," Hegseth said. "So we're going back to Congress and our folks there to ensure that we're properly funded for what's been done, for what we may have to do in the future."

The Washington Post first reported the request, citing an unnamed senior Trump administration official.

Hegseth did not directly confirm the \$200 billion figure when asked about it by a reporter, saying "the number could move."

Hegseth and Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed the media at the Pentagon on Thursday. In addition to the reported funding request, they spoke about the volume of attacks launched at Iran and Wednesday's dignified transfer of six U.S. airmen who died last week in western Iraq.

Hegseth opened the briefing by saying the families of the six

airmen killed in the crash of their Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker had a simple message for him.

"We grieved with their families, and we listened. What I heard through tears, through hugs, through strength and through unbreakable resolve was the same from family after family. They said, 'Finish this, honor their sacrifice. Do not waver. Do not stop until the job is done,'" Hegseth said.

Hegseth and Caine were among top U.S. officials who attended the dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, as the airmen were returned to their families.

Three of the airmen were part of the 99th Air Refueling Squadron: Maj. John A. Klinner, 33, of Auburn, Ala.; Capt. Ariana G. Savino, 31, of Covington, Wash.; and Tech. Sgt. Ashley B. Pruitt, 34, of Bardstown, Ky. The squadron is stationed in Birmingham, Ala., but functions administratively under the 6th Air Refueling Wing at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

Also killed were Capt. Seth R. Koval, 38, of Mooresville, Ind.; Capt. Curtis J. Angst, 30, of Wilmington, Ohio; and Tech. Sgt. Tyler H. Simmons, 28, of Colum-

bus, Ohio, who were assigned to the 121st Air Refueling Wing at Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base in Ohio.

The refueling aircraft went down in friendly airspace March 12.

The circumstances of the crash remain under investigation, though U.S. Central Command said it was not caused by hostile or friendly fire. Another plane involved landed safely.

Caine said the crash is still under investigation.

Hegseth said his 13-year-old son popped into his office last night as he was editing his remarks to ask about the war and the families his dad met at Dover.

"I looked at him and I said, 'They died for you, son, so that your generation doesn't have to deal with a nuclear Iran,'" he said. "It's the truth and they did. So to the families who said, 'finish this,' we will."

Thirteen service members have been killed and nearly 200 have been wounded during Operation Epic Fury, U.S. Central Command has confirmed. The vast majority of the wounded had minor injuries, and more than 180 of them have returned to duty, CENTCOM said.

Hegseth said the United States has struck more than 7,000 targets and Thursday "is the largest strike package yet," a line the Pentagon has repeated often during the campaign.

"The last job anyone in the world wants right now, senior leader for the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps]," the secretary said. "Temp jobs, all of them."

U.S. forces Tuesday employed multiple 5,000-pound bunker buster bombs on Iranian missile sites along Iran's coastline near the Strait of Hormuz, U.S. Central Command posted on X at the time.

Caine said Thursday that the U.S. has destroyed 120 Iranian Naval vessels and 44 mine layers.

"We're flying further to the east now and penetrating deeper into Iranian airspace to hunt and kill one way attack garrisons, destroying Iran's ability to project power outside of its borders," the chairman added.

Air Force A-10 Warthogs are being used in the southern flank against vessels along the Strait of Hormuz, Caine said. Also in the southern flank are AH-64 Apache helicopters.

## Iran maintains attacks on energy sites, defying Trump

*Bloomberg News*

Iran maintained attacks on energy assets around the Middle East even after President Donald Trump called for restraint, with strikes on key oil and gas infrastructure triggering a fresh surge in prices.

Tehran's response to Israel's assault on the giant South Pars gas field "is underway and not yet complete," the semi-official Iranian Students' News Agency

cited a military spokesman as saying Thursday. The targeting of energy facilities escalated the conflict as it nears the end of its third week, with no sign of an imminent ceasefire.

Saudi Arabia said a drone hit its Samref refinery on the Red Sea, a vital exit route for the world's biggest oil exporter with the Strait of Hormuz still effectively shut.

Qatar's Ras Laffan Industrial

City — home to the world's largest export plant for liquefied natural gas — suffered "extensive damage" after an Iranian missile strike sparked a fire. The United Arab Emirates shut a major gas facility due to falling debris from missiles.

Iran's strikes on Qatar have damaged facilities that produce 17% of the company's LNG export capacity and it will take as long as five years to repair

them, Reuters reported, citing QatarEnergy CEO Saad al-Kaabi.

The latest attacks increased the potential for other countries to join the United States and Israel in the conflict. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud warned overnight that the kingdom's restraint isn't "unlimited" and it reserves the right to take military action if necessary.

# Defense experts warn of Indo-Pac gap

## As US Marines deploy from Japan to the Middle East, allies have to fill void

By **BRIAN MCELHINEY**

*Stars and Stripes*

Sending a Marine expeditionary unit from Okinawa to stand by in the Middle East leaves a gap in U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific while increasing the defense burden on its Asian allies, according to analysts.

The amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli and roughly 2,500 members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit have been en route to the Middle East since March 13, according to multiple news reports.

The Tripoli and its amphibious ready group — the amphibious transport docks USS San Diego and USS New Orleans — are homeported at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force and 7th Fleet referred questions about the deployment to the Pentagon, which declined to comment Monday, citing operational se-

curity.

The 31st MEU has “unique capabilities” that would not be easily replaced without moving another expeditionary unit into the region, said retired Marine Col. Grant Newsham, a senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo.

“Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy doesn’t have enough amphibious ships in working order to keep enough MEU’s fully operational and deployable these days,” he said by email Wednesday.

The 31st is one of seven Marine expeditionary units and the only one permanently deployed in the Pacific.

It features a combination of air, ground and support elements designed to quickly respond to combat and noncombat situations, including humanitarian assistance and evacuations.

Even if additional forces

from the I MEF in California were moved into the region, “the lack of amphibious ships is a constraint,” Newsham said.

The 855-foot Tripoli can carry MV-22 Osprey tiltrotors, F-35 fighter jets and a variety of helicopters, such as the MH-60S Seahawk.

Sending the unit out of the Pacific “certainly sends a negative message to U.S. allies and partners about U.S. commitment and focus” on the region, said retired Navy Lt. Luke Collin, former director for Japan and Australia at the U.S. National Security Council and principal at the Asia Group advisory firm in Washington, D.C.

But pulling U.S. combat ships, aircraft, long-range munitions or integrated air and missile defense systems out of the Pacific “could have more significant impacts on U.S. deterrence,” he said by email on Wednesday.

“Although I don’t expect Chi-

na, Russia, or North Korea to push aggression further in the near-term, they will certainly seek to exploit this situation to press the narrative that the U.S. is a declining and unreliable power in Asia,” Collin wrote in his email.

The outcome of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific may not hinge entirely on the Marines’ absence, said Benjamin Blandin, a research fellow with the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies.

“In case of a direct Chinese attack on Japan or Taiwan, both should be able to hold up for at least a few weeks, granting enough time for the [Marine Corps] to come to the rescue,” he said in an email to Stars and Stripes Thursday.

Newsham said regional allies in the interim must rely on their own defense capabilities.

“It’s just the reality of the world today and the size of the U.S. military,” he wrote.

## Aircraft operating from USS Nimitz in southeast Pacific

By **GARY WARNER**

*Stars and Stripes*

Squadrons of attack aircraft have been sent to the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz as it heads south for exercises in the Pacific Ocean south of San Diego, the Navy said late Wednesday.

“I can confirm that our air wing joined us after getting underway from San Diego,” Lt. Cmdr. Peter Pagano, spokesman for the Nimitz, said in an email from aboard the ship.

Pagano said the exact makeup of the squadrons would be released Friday in a statement from U.S. 4th Fleet, the com-

mand responsible for U.S. naval forces operating in Caribbean, Central and South American regions.

The Nimitz left its homeport, Naval Base Kitsap in Bremerton, Wash., on March 7. The nearly 51-year-old carrier was headed to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., where it was to arrive in mid-April for its planned decommissioning.

After departing Bremerton, the Navy announced the Nimitz would participate in the Southern Seas 2026 exercises.

The Nimitz made a brief stop at North Island Naval Air Sta-

tion, in San Diego, before departing on the morning of March 14.

Navy photos released Tuesday show aircraft the service says were operating on the carrier on March 14 and 15, including F/A-18 Hornet fighter-attack jets and EA-18G Growler electronic warfare jets.

The Navy said the carrier was operating at the time in the 3rd Fleet area of operations. The 3rd Fleet is responsible for naval operations in the eastern and northern Pacific Ocean.

The Navy has not said what,

if any, escort vessels are accompanying the Nimitz.

Destroyers or cruisers are usually dispatched when the carrier is operating as a strike group.

The service announced last week that the Nimitz’s service life would be extended into 2027, allowing the Navy to maintain the congressionally mandated minimum of 11 aircraft carriers.

The USS John F. Kennedy, the Navy’s second Ford-class aircraft carrier, is scheduled to be delivered and commissioned in March 2027.

# Marines plan to mark AV-8B retirement

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The legacy of the Marine Corps AV-8B Harrier II ground-attack “jumpjet” will be celebrated during a week’s worth of events late this spring in North Carolina.

The “Harrier Sundown Celebration” will be hosted by the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point from June 1-4, according to a memorandum posted Tuesday on the Marine Corps Administration website.

For the “AV-8B Sundown Ceremony,” the main event will be a ceremony held on the Cherry Point flight line on June 3.

The Boeing AV-8B Harrier II is being replaced in Marine

squadrons by the Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning II, a fifth-generation stealth fighter and ground-attack aircraft. The B variant has a vertical takeoff and landing capability like the Harrier.

The Harrier officially reaches the end of its service life at the close of the 2026 fiscal year on Sept. 30. The official deactivation is scheduled for September, the Marines said in the memo.

The Harriers trace their lineage to the British-designed Hawker Siddeley Harrier Gr. 1, which first flew in December 1967. It was the first operational warplane with vertical/short takeoff and landing (V/STOL) capabilities.

The Marines procured the aircraft as the AV-8A Harrier. The plane’s vertical takeoff and landing ability allowed the Marines to operate from rough airfields and amphibious assault ships.

The design was extensively modified, and its engines were upgraded, in a joint effort by McDonnell Douglas and British Aerospace. The Marines introduced the AV-8B Harrier II in 1985. Boeing took over the aircraft program when it acquired McDonnell Douglas in 1997.

The AV-8B Harrier II flew thousands of bombing and close-ground-support missions during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and bombed targets during the NATO intervention in Kosovo in

1999. It has played a role in many of the major U.S. interventions during the wars on terrorism following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The sundown week events will include a gala, golf tournament, 5K run, picnic, and other social events hosted by the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, local businesses, local governments, and the Marine Corps Aviation Association. An open house will feature Marine squadrons and include the Harrier’s simulator.

Interested participants can find the full list of events, including those open to the public or requiring prior registration, by checking the AV-8B Harrier II sundown official website.

## Gecko Robotics gets \$71M Navy contract to maintain warships

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

A U.S. company has secured a contract worth up to \$71 million to use robotics and artificial intelligence to support Navy ship maintenance, as the service continues to invest in advanced technologies.

The Navy and the General Services Administration awarded the contract to Pittsburgh-based Gecko Robotics, which will use wall-climbing robots, drones and sensors to scan and monitor warships for structural issues, the company said in a news release Wednesday.

The contract calls for work over five years on 18 vessels in the U.S. Pacific Fleet, including guided-missile destroyers and littoral combat ships.

Gecko said its technology uses AI to create detailed digital models and identify structural issues, including those not visible to the naked eye.

“The previous way of doing this is putting a ship into dry dock, building scaffolding all around the ships and then gathering information, you know,

point by point; gathering very little information,” company co-founder Jake Loosarian told CNBC on Tuesday. “We gather millions more information and data sets, and we do so in about three to four months, faster than has ever been done before.”

The company did not respond to a request for additional comment.

The contract reflects the service’s broader push to incorporate robotics and AI into shipbuilding and maintenance.

In December, Navy Secretary John Phelan announced a \$448 million investment in the Shipbuilding Operations System, an initiative that uses AI to aggregate data, streamline engineering and identify delays early in the construction process.

Initial tests showed that planning submarine construction schedules was reduced from 160 hours of manual work to less than 10 minutes, the Navy said in a Dec. 9 news release.

Other countries, including South Korea and Japan, are also investing heavily in similar technologies.

## Court upholds dismissal of airman’s sex doll case

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The military’s highest court has upheld the dismissal of a case involving an airman who said he performed sexual acts with a childlike silicone doll in the privacy of his dorm room.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces on Monday affirmed the judgment of the Air Force criminal appeals court, which ruled that Airman Zachary Rocha’s conduct was constitutionally protected.

In the court’s majority opinion, justices wrote they lacked the authority to make their own findings of fact and reviewed an appeals court decision for the application of “correct legal principles.”

The high court wrote that it was not sure another review by the Air Force appeals court was justified, stating justices answered the most important question when they “stated Rocha had a constitutionally protected liberty interest to privately engage in sexual activities with his doll,” according to court papers.

But in a scathing dissent, the

court’s top judge warned the decision lowers the legal threshold for deviant behavior.

“And so,” wrote Chief Judge Keith Ohlson, “hundreds of thousands of servicemembers who serve in the Air Force and Space Force are now authorized to penetrate ... child sex dolls while on base and at their leisure.”

The 3-2 decision concludes a case that took five years for the U.S. military’s legal system to resolve. In March 2021, Rocha was convicted in a general court-martial at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, of one count of indecent conduct for “engaging in sexual acts with a sex doll with the physical characteristics of a female child,” according to court documents.

Rocha told investigators he benefited emotionally from the doll, whom he named Adele. He also said he engaged in sexual acts with the doll but denied having sexual interest in children, court papers state. Rocha said he stopped his sexual activity when realizing the doll looked childlike, according to court documents.

# Dems walk out of Bondi briefing on Epstein files

*Bloomberg News*

WASHINGTON — Congressional Democrats walked out of a briefing with U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi and Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche that was intended to cover the Justice Department's handling of files related to sex trafficking investigations of disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Rep. Robert Garcia of California denounced the Wednesday evening session of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee as a "fake hearing" and said Bondi had repeatedly refused to say whether she would comply with a subpoena for a committee deposition regarding the Epstein inquiry.

"This has been completely set up in a way that's been irrespon-

sible. And quite frankly, we believe a way for the attorney general to get out of her answering questions under oath and to the public which we will not accept," Garcia told reporters.

Asked as she left Capitol Hill whether she would appear for the deposition, Bondi said "I made it crystal clear, I will follow the law."

Rep. James Comer, the Republican chair of the oversight panel, said that he continues to pursue the subpoena for testimony and said lawmakers will "talk about" holding her in contempt if she does not comply.

"We were there to answer questions," Bondi said about her appearance Wednesday. "We sat there saying, 'anything you want to ask us,'" and then Democrats "stormed out of the

meeting."

In an X post a short time later, the Republican-led panel said that "both Attorney General Bondi and Deputy Attorney General Blanche were answering substantive questions, and Attorney General Bondi stated she would follow the law regarding her subpoena."

The Justice Department has released more than 3 million pages of documents, emails, photos and other files related to probes into Epstein in response to a law that Congress passed. Some of the files, however, included redactions.

Critics claimed the redactions were excessive and mishandled, including hiding names of co-conspirators.

The department has been allowing lawmakers to view some

unredacted files on computers at one of the agency's offices in Washington, but Democrats accused Bondi and her aides of using that system to improperly monitor the searches conducted by members of Congress.

Bondi appeared before the committee last month in a hearing that grew contentious. Lawmakers pressed her on the department's rollout of the Epstein files. Democrats also accused her of using the Justice Department to target enemies of President Donald Trump.

Sen. Ron Wyden has accused Blanche of blocking the Drug Enforcement Administration from releasing an unredacted document from the Epstein files about an investigation involving narcotics trafficking and money laundering.

## Fed holds rates steady, Powell vows to stay amid DOJ probe

*Bloomberg News*

Federal Reserve officials left interest rates unchanged and continued to expect one rate cut this year as they acknowledged increased uncertainty due to war in the Middle East.

Chair Jerome Powell emphasized that to resume lowering rates, officials would have to see progress in reducing inflation, especially goods inflation that has been boosted by tariffs.

"If we don't see that progress, then we won't see the rate cut," Powell said in remarks to reporters after the Fed released its decision.

That progress may be difficult to achieve. In economic forecasts released with their decision, officials raised their outlook for inflation in 2026 to 2.7% from 2.4%. Notably, they saw the core measure — which excludes volatile food and energy categories — also rising to 2.7%.

The S&P 500 index extended losses as Powell spoke, while Treasury yields and the dollar

rose.

Powell surprised Fed watchers by making some definitive statements about his near-term future at the central bank. He told reporters he had "no intention" of resigning as a member of the Fed's Board of Governors until an investigation by the Department of Justice into a building renovation project is "well and truly over."

He said that if his successor is not confirmed before his term as chair ends in May, he would serve as chair pro tempore. The Fed has conferred that temporary designation in the past on a board member to lead the institution when the chair role was vacant. Powell's term as a governor extends until January 2028.

He said he hadn't decided whether he would depart if the investigation were closed.

The Federal Open Market Committee voted 11-1 to hold the benchmark federal funds rate in a range of 3.5% to 3.75%.

## Markwayne Mullin moves closer to DHS confirmation

*New York Daily News*

Sen. Markwayne Mullin won a committee vote to become the new Homeland Security secretary by a narrow 8-7 margin with a boost from Democratic Sen. John Fetterman.

The nomination of Mullin, who has a bitter feud with Republican colleague Sen. Rand Paul, advanced to the full Senate after Fetterman broke ranks with the rest of his party to advance Mullin's confirmation.

Paul, the committee chair, voted against the Oklahoma lawmaker, whom he accused of having "anger issues" and backing political violence in an unusually bitter spat stemming from the attack on Paul by an angry neighbor.

"My AYE is rooted in a strong committed, constructive working relationship with Senator Mullin for our nation's security," Fetterman tweeted, explaining his vote.

The confirmation will now

proceed to the Senate floor where it could get final approval next week as Mullin prepares to replace fired DHS Secretary Kristi Noem.

Republican supporters, along with Fetterman, say they hope Mullin can figure out a way to end the partial government shutdown that has roiled air travel by forcing airport screeners to work without paychecks for about a month.

Lines at security checkpoints have stretched out the door at airports in some spring break hot spots and have topped an hour at some times at New York's JFK, LaGuardia and Newark airports.

Noem was fired after a tumultuous tenure marked by perceived policy and public relations missteps, especially her handling of President Donald Trump's mass deportation effort that led to the killings of two U.S. citizens by immigration agents in Minneapolis.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Carpool fail: ‘Nice try — but jackets don’t count’

**CA** LOS ANGELES — When it comes to cheating the carpool lane in California, drivers can be creative.

There was the safety dummy that was misappropriated by impatient commuters. The mannequin wearing a baseball cap in Glendora and one with a drawn-on mustache in the Bay Area.

So by those standards, what the California Highway Patrol discovered when they pulled over a driver in the carpool lane in West Covina recently would be half-hearted.

According to a social media post by the CHP’s Baldwin Park office, officers recently pulled over a driver in the high-occupancy vehicle lane of the 10 Freeway and found a jacket wrapped around the passenger seat headrest.

“Nice try — but jackets don’t count toward Carpool Lane requirements,” the CHP said in its post.

The driver was cited for violating the carpool lane, which could be a more than \$400 ticket.

Authorities did not release the identity of the driver.

### Capitol Police budget request tops \$1B

**DC** WASHINGTON — The Capitol Police must expand to face a rise in threats to lawmakers’ safety, Chief Michael Sullivan told House appropriators on Tuesday.

The department is seeking more than \$1 billion for fiscal

2027, an increase of 20% over current levels and its largest request to date.

This was Sullivan’s first budget hearing since his hiring as chief last June, after serving as interim leader of the Phoenix Police Department. His hiring came as Capitol Police leadership has continued to face scrutiny over its handling of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack and some embarrassing lapses that let guns through security checkpoints.

The force must do more to boost retention as it loses officers to retirement and competes with other agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Sullivan testified before the Legislative Branch Appropriations subcommittee.

Lawmakers were largely supportive of Sullivan’s request, with several mentioning threats they themselves received.

### Judge orders extension of application deadline

**TX** DALLAS — Texas’ school voucher-style program application window has been extended by two weeks, following a federal judge’s order Tuesday. He cited concerns about the exclusion of Islamic schools from the program.

With applications to the Texas Education Freedom Accounts set to close at 11:59 p.m. Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Alfred Bennett, of the Southern District of Texas, granted a temporary restraining order. At a Tuesday morning court hearing, he called it “troubling” that Islamic schools were being left out, according to the Houston Chronicle.

“We welcome the court’s decision to extend the application deadline,” said the Council on American-Islamic Relations-Texas in a statement. “All families, regardless of their faith, deserve equal access to educational opportunities supported by public programs.”

More than 200,000 students applied to the \$1 billion program, according to the state Comptroller’s Office, which runs TEFA. Families can receive public money to support their child’s private schooling and homeschooling.

While at least 2,200 schools have been approved to accept TEFA funds, no accredited Islamic schools have been signed off to take part in the state program.

### City moves to drop representation in lawsuit

**NY** NEW YORK — Former New York City Mayor Eric Adams is set to lose his taxpayer-funded legal representation in a sexual assault case against him, the city’s Law Department said Tuesday.

Corporation Counsel Steve Banks argued in a court filing that Adams shouldn’t be represented by the city because he wasn’t acting within the bounds of his city employment when the alleged assault occurred.

The move from the Mamdani administration to yank the free legal representation could pose a financial problem for the former mayor, who is millions in the hole already for his now-dismissed federal corruption case, per city records.

Former transit bureau employee Lorna Beach-Mathura accused Adams of sexually as-

saulting her after she sought career advice from him in 1993. The suit, which alleges Adams drove her to a vacant lot and solicited oral sex from her, was filed in Manhattan Supreme Court in March 2024.

### Brothers sentenced in HIV-drug scheme

**FL** MIAMI — Two brothers found guilty of buying tens of millions of dollars worth of black-market HIV drugs and reselling them to numerous pharmacies in the Miami area and other locations will be imprisoned for a couple of decades.

Defendants Charles and Patrick Boyd were sentenced to 20 years and 18 years in prison, respectively, last Friday after they were convicted in October of defrauding the Food and Drug Administration. Jurors found that the brothers — accused of conspiring with a South Florida business partner who cut a plea deal — used a wholesale business based in Miami and Maryland to buy more than \$90 million of illicit pharmaceutical drugs and distribute them to unwitting customers nationwide.

U.S. District Judge William Dimitrouleas also ordered the brothers to pay a forfeiture judgment of \$21.8 million to the U.S. government, reflecting their unlawful profits.

“They sold black-market HIV drugs with falsified paperwork designed to conceal the drugs’ illicit origin from both customers and the FDA,” prosecutors Alexander Thor Pogozelski and Jacqueline Zee DerOvanesian said in a sentencing memo.

— From wire reports

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# Miami asserts itself in First Four vs. SMU

*Associated Press*

DAYTON, Ohio — Eian Elmer scored 23 points and Miami (Ohio) beat SMU 89-79 on Wednesday night in the First Four for its first NCAA Tournament victory in 27 years.

Elmer went 6-for-9 from 3-point range as the 11th-seeded RedHawks (32-1), undefeated during the regular season, advanced in the Midwest Region to play No. 6 seed Tennessee.

Brant Byers added 19 points, including four 3s, and Luke Skaljac had 17 points for Miami, making its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2007. The RedHawks finished 16-for-41 from 3-point range.

“The message I gave our guys before the game was they should leave no doubt with who the more attacking team was,” Miami coach Travis Steele said. “I thought that was very evident from the jump ball all the way to

the end of the game.”

Jaden Toombs led SMU (20-14) with 20 points and 11 rebounds. Jaron Pierre Jr. scored 18 points and Boopie Miller had 15 for the Mustangs, who reached the NCAA Tournament for the first time in nine years. They’re still looking for their first victory in the event since 1988.

The RedHawks went 31-0 during a captivating regular season — the only Division I Men’s basketball team to go unbeaten in 2025-26 and just the nation’s eighth undefeated regular season in the past 50 years.

But Miami lost its MAC Tournament opener to UMass, putting its NCAA Tournament hopes in jeopardy because of a schedule that ranked 339th in overall strength and featured no Quadrant 1 games.

Some analysts and critics questioned whether they be-

longed in the field with an at-large bid, but the RedHawks silenced some skeptics Wednesday with a rousing victory over an Atlantic Coast Conference opponent.

“We’re not really focused on proving whether we belong, honestly,” Elmer said. “Everybody in the locker room thinks we do. I just think if anything we’re just going to go out there, play our hardest and have fun.”

Elmer had 14 points and went 4 of 6 from 3-point range in the first half. Byers hit back-to-back 3s to give Miami an 11-point lead.

“They put five guys on the court that can shoot the 3, so they’re hard to guard,” SMU coach Andy Enfield said. “We outscored them in the paint 46-20 tonight, which was our game plan to really try to score the ball in the lane.”

The Mustangs missed their

first seven 3-point attempts before Pierre connected with 7:02 remaining in the first half. They went 5 of 19 from long distance.

Almar Atlason hit a pair of 3s to give the RedHawks a 63-50 advantage early in the second half. He scored 12 points.

Skaljac’s transition 3 extended Miami’s lead to 71-57.

SMU had a size advantage, but foul trouble negated some of that. Mustangs 7-foot-2 center Samet Yigitoglu fouled out with 1:31 remaining. He finished with eight points and six rebounds.

The undersized RedHawks matched SMU with 35 rebounds and 17 second-chance points.

“Listen, our group is uber-confident,” Steele said. “We know we belong. I told our guys afterwards, man, I’m happy, but the job is not finished. We want to continue to advance in this thing.”

## Prairie View A&M tops Lehigh for 1st March Madness win

*Associated Press*

DAYTON, Ohio — Dontae Horne scored 25 points and Cory Wells had 19 points and 11 rebounds as Prairie View A&M earned its first NCAA Tournament victory, 67-55 over Lehigh on Wednesday night in the First Four.

“Definitely gratifying,” coach Bryan Smith said. “A heck of a basketball game. We’re definitely excited to survive and advance and move on to the first round on Friday night.”

Lance Williams added 10 points for the Panthers (19-17), making their third tournament appearance after going 5-27 last season. They advance as the No. 16 seed in the South Region to face top seed and defending national champion Florida.

“As basketball players you watch every NCAA Tournament, and just to think that you’re here now and you’ll be playing the team who just won last year,” Wells said. “We’re going to go out there and compete regardless.”

Horne also had seven rebounds and four steals. Horne, Wells and Williams each played all 40 minutes.

Lehigh leading scorer Nasir Whitlock, the

Patriot League Tournament MVP, went scoreless for more than 26 minutes and finished with five points. He was 2-for-15 shooting.

The last time Whitlock did not reach double figures was Nov. 9, when he had two points in a 69-47 loss at West Virginia.

“Definitely not the way I think anybody up here thought it was going to go,” Whitlock said. “But that’s just basketball. Sometimes it goes your way, sometimes it doesn’t. Today is one of those days where I thought we couldn’t really get too much going.”

Hank Alvey led the Mountain Hawks (18-17) with 23 points and 15 rebounds. He was the only scorer in double digits for Lehigh.

Prairie View A&M has won eight straight, including a 72-66 victory over Southern in the SWAC championship game.

The Mountain Hawks, in the tournament for the sixth time, won the Patriot League Tournament by beating Boston University 74-60 in the title game. The lone NCAA Tournament victory for Lehigh was an upset of Duke in 2012.

Andrew Urosevic hit consecutive 3-pointers, the second benefiting from a kind bounce, to give the Mountain Hawks their

largest lead at 23-15. But just when it appeared they might start to pull away, Wells scored five straight points — including a 3 — to help the Panthers get back into the game.

Lehigh led 29-27 at halftime despite Whitlock, who averages 21 points per game, being scoreless. The Mountain Hawks were 3 of 13 from 3-point range in the opening half.

Whitlock missed his first nine shots before connecting on a 3 with 13:12 remaining.

“We’ve got a great player in Nasir Whitlock, but he had somebody blanketed in front of him all night long,” Lehigh coach Brett Reed said. “It was harder for him to get angles and opportunities to really finish at the rim or get the separation that he needed.”

With the Mountain Hawks’ top scorer held in check, Prairie View A&M extended its lead to 51-41 on a jumper by Wells with 8:34 left.

“I think the first time we were here in 2019, we got off to a great start,” Smith said. “I think we were up by 11 on Fairleigh Dickinson at halftime, but we didn’t finish. The main thing was to finish, and I think we did that. I think we defended. We flew around.”

# Johnston scores SO winner as Stars beat Avs

Associated Press

DENVER — Jake Oettinger made 33 saves through overtime, Wyatt Johnston scored the shootout winner and the Dallas Stars beat the Colorado Avalanche 2-1 on Wednesday night to tighten the race for first place in the division, conference and league standings.

Dallas (43-15-10, 96 points) pulled within two points of Colorado (44-13-10, 98 points), which leads the NHL atop the Western Conference. It's the closest any team has been to the Avalanche since Dec. 10.

Johnston had the lone goal in the shootout while Oettinger stopped all three of Colorado's shots, including Nathan MacKinnon to seal the win. It's the third straight shootout this season between the Central Division rivals.

Jason Robertson also scored for the Stars, who bounced back from a 6-3 loss to Utah on Monday. It ended their streak of gaining a point in a franchise record-tying 15 straight games (14-0-1).

Oettinger improved to 12-0-1 over his last 13 games.

The Avs dropped to 1-3-1 over their last five games, including a 7-2 loss to Pittsburgh on Monday. Scott Wedgewood made 17 saves against Dallas after being pulled in the first period against the Penguins.

**Devils 6, Rangers 3:** Jack

Hughes and Connor Brown each had goal and two assists to help visiting New Jersey beat New York for its third straight victory.

The Devils are 10 points behind Boston and Detroit for the two Eastern Conference wild-card spots. They opened a five-game trip after going 5-2 on a homestand.

Nico Hischier and Jesper Bratt each had a goal and an assist for New Jersey, and Arseny Gritsyuk and Timo Meier also scored. Jacob Markstrom made 14 saves.

Vladislav Gavrikov, Mika Zibanejad and Conor Sheary scored for the Rangers. Jonathan Quick stopped 33 shots.

**Hurricanes 6, Penguins 5 (OT):** Sean Walker scored with 28.3 seconds left in overtime as host Carolina beat Pittsburgh, spoiling Sidney Crosby's return to the Penguins' lineup.

Jackson Blake had a goal and two assists, Logan Stankoven, Taylor Hall and Walker each had a goal and an assist for the Hurricanes. Jordan Martinook and K'Andre Miller also scored and Nikolaj Ehlers finished with three assists. Frederik Andersen made 30 saves.

Erik Karlsson had two goals and an assist, Crosby added a goal and an assist, and Bryan Rust and Ben Kindel also scored for Pittsburgh. Stuart Skinner stopped 38 shots in the second

matchup in nine nights between the top teams in the Metropolitan Division that went beyond regulation.

Pittsburgh completed a 2-1-2 trip that began with last week's 5-4 shootout loss to the Eastern Conference- and Metropolitan Division-leading Hurricanes.

**Capitals 4, Senators 1:** Alex Ovechkin scored his 922nd goal and Cole Hutson scored his first to lead host Washington past Ottawa.

Ovechkin is a goal shy of 1,000 — if his 77 postseason tallies are included.

The Capitals are still six points out of a playoff spot with time running out, but this was an encouraging night for the franchise. Hutson made his NHL debut less than a week after the end of his season at Boston University, and the 19-year-old defenseman showed off his smooth skating and stickhandling throughout the night, finally scoring into an empty net with 25.7 seconds remaining.

It was the 40-year-old Ovechkin who opened the scoring in the second period when Rasmus Sandin's pass bounced off his right skate past goalie Linus Ullmark. That momentarily gave Ovechkin sole possession of the team lead in goals this season with 25, but then Tom Wilson beat Ullmark later in the period for his 25th.

**Flames 2, Blues 1 (SO):** Joel

Farabee and rookie Matvei Gri-din scored in a shootout to give host Calgary a victory over St. Louis.

Connor Zary scored early in the first period for the Flames, and Devin Cooley stopped 26 shots.

Dylan Holloway tied it for the Blues early in the second. Joel Hofer made 31 saves.

After Farabee scored in the second round of the shootout to give Calgary a 1-0 lead, coach Ryan Huska turned to Gridin after Jimmy Snuggerud was stopped, and Gridin won it with a shot over Hofer's glove.

**Flyers 3, Ducks 2 (OT):** Noah Cates scored on a deflection off goalie Lukas Dostal's skate at 2:17 of overtime and visiting Philadelphia beat Anaheim after a review for offsidess on the play.

The Pacific Division-leading Ducks forced overtime on Leo Carlsson's goal with 1:54 left in regulation.

Dan Vladar made 34 saves to help the Flyers rebound from a 2-1 shootout loss to Columbus at home Saturday night. Philadelphia is six points behind Boston and Detroit for the two Eastern Conference wild-card spots.

Luke Glendening had his first goal of the season and Owen Tippett also scored for the Flyers. Trevor Zegras was held off the scoresheet in his first game in Anaheim since his offseason trade.

## Prince sparks 17-0 run, Nebraska women win in First Four

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Britt Prince scored 22 points on 10-for-14 shooting, Nebraska opened the third quarter with a 17-0 run, and the Cornhuskers beat Richmond 75-56 on Wednesday night at the NCAA women's basketball First Four.

No. 11 seed Nebraska (19-12) plays sixth-seeded Baylor on Friday in the Round of 64.

Prince came around a screen, was fouled on a pull-up jumper from the free-throw line and converted the

three-point play to open the second half. Her 3-pointer with 4:42 left in the third capped a 17-0 run that made it 51-32.

Maggie Doogan — the Atlantic 10 player of the year for the second consecutive season — was 8-for-13 shooting and had 24 points and 10 rebounds for the Spiders.

**Missouri State 85, Stephen F. Austin 75:** At Austin, Texas, Kaemyn Beke-meier had 22 points and 13 rebounds, Lainie Douglas added 14 points and 10 rebounds, and the Lady Bears beat the

Ladyjacks in a matchup of 16 seeds.

Missouri State (23-12), which has won at least one game in each of its last four NCAA Tournament appearances, plays top-seeded Texas on Friday.

The Lady Bears shot 48% (33-for-69) and outrebounded SFA 50-30 to overcome 19 turnovers, which the Ladyjacks converted into 22 points.

Missouri State used a 9-0 run to take the lead for good late in the first half. Angel Scott capped the spurt with a 3-pointer that made it 45-37 with 1:55 to go in the second quarter.

# Doncic nets 40; Lakers win 7th straight

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Luka Doncic had 40 points and LeBron James added 30 as the Los Angeles Lakers extended their winning streak to seven games with a 124-116 win over the Houston Rockets on Wednesday night.

It's the 10th win in 11 games for the Lakers, who also beat the Rockets 100-92 on Monday night.

Los Angeles led by 4 with about 90 seconds remaining when Doncic found James for an alley-oop dunk. Kevin Durant had a turnover on the other end, and Doncic made a 3-pointer to push the lead to 120-111 with less than a minute left.

Doncic had 10 assists and nine rebounds to finish one rebound shy of a triple-double. James was 13-for-14 from the floor and had five rebounds to give him 12,002, making him the 23rd player in NBA history to reach 12,000 rebounds.

Alperen Sengun had 27 points and 10 assists for Houston in his return after missing two games with a back issue. Amen Thompson added 26 points and 11 rebounds as the Rockets lost for the third time in four games.

Durant had just two points in the first half and finished with 18 points and six rebounds.

The Lakers trailed by 2 before Rui Hachimura and Doncic made consecutive 3-pointers to take a 113-109 lead with about three minutes to go.

Thompson made a layup for Houston before a dunk by Hachimura left LA up by 4 with less than two minutes left.

The game was tied early in the fourth quarter before James scored the first four points in a 6-0 run that gave the Lakers a 102-96 lead with less than nine minutes to go.

**Celtics 120, Warriors 99:** Jaylen Brown scored 23 of his 32 points in the first half and host Boston rolled over Golden State.

Jayson Tatum added 24

points and 10 rebounds for the Celtics, who have won three straight.

It was Tatum's fifth time scoring at least 20 points in the six games he's played since making his season debut following Achilles tendon surgery. It also marked his third double-double.

Golden State cut a 21-point third-quarter deficit to 11 early in the fourth, but Boston responded with a 17-6 run to push the lead back to 22 with just more than five minutes to play.

Gary Payton II and Pat Spencer both had 14 points to lead the Warriors, who have lost six of seven. They are 6-13 since star guard Stephen Curry was sidelined with a right knee injury. Draymond Green and Gui Santos scored 13 apiece.

**Thunder 121, Nets 92:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 20 points and visiting Oklahoma City beat Brooklyn for its 10th straight win.

Gilgeous-Alexander was 8-for-9 from the field and was subbed out with 4:28 remaining in the third quarter with the Thunder leading by 38. The reigning NBA MVP extended his NBA-record of 62 consecutive road games with at least 20 points.

Jared McCain had 26 points and Aaron Wiggins finished with 17 for the Thunder, who led by as many as 42 and never trailed in the second game of a back-to-back.

Jalen Wilson had 15 points off the bench and rookie Nolan Traore was the lone starter in double figures with 13 for the Nets, who have lost their last five games and 15 of 17. Leading scorer Michael Porter Jr. (ankle) missed his fourth straight game.

**Hawks 135, Mavericks 120:** CJ McCollum scored 24 points, Nickeil Alexander-Walker had 22, and visiting Atlanta beat Dallas for their 11th straight win.

Dyson Daniels had 19 points on 9-for-13 shooting and Jalen

Johnson scored 17 points with 11 rebounds for the Hawks, who at 38-31 are in the middle of the race for a play-in playoff spot.

Atlanta hasn't won at least 11 in a row since winning a franchise-record 19 straight during the 2014-2015 season. Their current streak is tied for the fourth-longest winning streak in club history.

Daniel Gafford came off the bench to lead the Mavericks with 24, P.J. Washington had 23 and Cooper Flagg added 17.

The Mavericks have now lost 11 of their last 13 and appear destined for the draft lottery at 23-47.

**Trail Blazers 127, Pacers 119:** Deni Avdija scored 23 of his 32 points in the first and Donovan Clingan added a career-high 28 points and grabbed 13 rebounds to help visiting Portland hold off hard-charging Indiana.

The Trail Blazers won for the third time in four games as they close in on clinching a Western Conference play-in spot in what figures to be a wide-open postseason.

Indiana extended the longest losing streak in its NBA franchise history to 15 games.

**Raptors 139, Bulls 109:** RJ Barrett scored 23 points, Brandon Ingram had 18 and visiting Toronto pounded Chicago for its third consecutive win.

Toronto shot 57% (48-for-84) from the field and put seven players in double figures in the opener of a five-game trip. Scottie Barnes had 18 points and seven rebounds, and Ja'Kobe Walter also scored 18.

The Raptors led by as many as 38 while completing a sweep of their three-game season series against the Bulls.

Matas Buzelis scored 19 points for Chicago, which lost for the third time in four games. Collin Sexton had 14 in his return from a left leg injury.

**Pelicans 124, Clippers 109:** Saddiq Bey scored 25 points, Trey Murphy added 23 and host

New Orleans overcame an early 18-point hole to beat Los Angeles.

Dejounte Murray had 17 points and 11 assists, while Zion Williamson and rookie Derrick Queen each scored 14 for the Pelicans, who received a standing ovation as the final seconds wound down on their sixth straight victory at home and ninth win in their past 13 games overall.

Kawhi Leonard scored 25 points and John Collins added 18 for the Clippers, who dropped a game below .500 (34-35), but maintained a tenuous hold on the No. 8 spot in the Western Conference standings, a half-game ahead of Portland.

**Timberwolves 147, Jazz 111:** Ayo Dosunmu scored 23 points and had nine rebounds in his second straight start in place of the injured Anthony Edwards and host Minnesota took charge in the second quarter to cruise past Utah.

Rudy Gobert had 21 points and 12 rebounds, and Julius Randle also scored 21 points and had eight assists for the Timberwolves, who have won two in a row without their All-Star guard.

Minnesota announced Tuesday that Edwards will miss one to two weeks with right knee inflammation before being re-evaluated.

**Grizzlies 125, Nuggets 118:** Ty Jerome had 21 points, nine rebounds and nine assists as host Memphis snapped their eight-game losing streak with a victory over Denver.

Olivier-Maxence Prosper scored 19 points and GG Jackson added 16 for the injury-depleted Grizzlies (24-44), who are 4-15 in their last 19 games after winning for the first time since March 1 at Indiana.

Nikola Jokic had 29 points, 14 rebounds and nine assists for Denver, just missing his sixth triple-double in the past eight games — although he did rack up 10 turnovers.